

# BY EXTON RIVER

Drawings by  
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"You're Not the Office Boy!" Exclaimed the Chief.

**T**HE office boy's hand outstretched to take a pile of copy caught the attention of the managing editor. Office boys' hands were, in his experience, shapeless lumps. This hand was slender, and the fingers tapered to clear, white nails. The boy was large. His red hair was brushed into a high pompadour. A pair of expressionless eyes stared straight before him.

His mouth hung half open.

"Have I ever seen you before?" asked the editor.

"I don't know, Sir." The boy's voice was as expressionless as his face.

"Are you a new one?"

"Been here a week, Sir. Jim Crotty is sick, and he sent me to take his place. The business office said I could stay till Jim got well."

"Take that copy to the composing room. Tell Mr. Allen I want to see him."

"Allen," he said abruptly, as the city editor entered the room, "haven't you found a single hint of a clue to that story we want to unearth for the destruction of Joseph Beddle?"

The city editor shook his head. "Not a fragment, Mr. Northrup."

"Didn't Strothers learn anything on that last trip?"

"No. He went to Beddle's home in Exton and hung around for a week. The sweet-souled, patient natives showed him the meeting house and the public library that Beddle had built and told him that Beddle raised the best breed of cows in the country. That's all the information he acquired, except that Exton had stunning scenery and good fishing."

The managing editor's eyes flickered to a picture on the wall opposite his desk, a narrow river, tree bordered, a dying sun, and its golden light on water and treetops. He turned his chair away from the picture and faced the city editor.

"Allen, we have to get that story. Before the General Assembly there is a bill of great importance to the people of this State. It looks innocent. It looks as if it had been designed for the good of the people. But it is a tremendous steel. It is one of those fatally popular bills that the people cry for today and in a few years will curse. Behind it is a big dash fund and public sentiment. We've hammered it in our columns. We've kept men at the capital lobbying against it. We've tried to show the people the joker in it. But we have accomplished nothing."

"There is one way left to defeat the bill, and that is to expose the rottenness of its author and promoter. Beddle, under the direction of the corporation that owns him, framed and introduced the measure, and has guided it almost to its passage. In one week it will be read for the last time in the House and voted on. If we can show the people the real character of Joseph Beddle, saintly hypocrite, his bill will be utterly discredited. We must have a story, true and reputation rending, before the bill is voted on."

"We can't run a scarehead story till we find a crack

in the rascal's self-protecting plaster cast of honesty."

"Haven't we a man on the paper who can find that crack and give us a chance to use chisels and hammers?" demanded the chief incoherently. "Strothers ought to have brought back something from Exton besides the thrilling information that Beddle keeps cows. We have watched every action of Beddle's at the capital. We've connected him with several suspicious deals; but we have never proved anything. The exposure of men of his class is best effected through incidents of their private lives. I sent Strothers to Exton to find the incident in Beddle's life, and he returns babbling of cows. If I had gone there—He stopped suddenly."

"You wouldn't go?" suggested the city editor. "You are the best investigator—"

The chief walked to the window and stared down into the street. "I wouldn't go to Exton," he snapped, "if by so doing I could send Beddle to jail!"

A few hours later a lumpy, freckled hand outstretched for copy came within the vision of the managing editor.

"Lack again, Jim?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir. The new boy said he had to leave town."

**EXTON COUNTY** is a land of green pastures and wide grain fields. The greenest pastures and the widest fields belong to Joseph Beddle, member of the State Legislature. Exton River runs as a boundary beside the Beddle land, and across the river is the farm of Nathan Hamm. Mr. Hamm's grain fields are mere patches, and his pastures are rocky and sparsely covered. His house and barns sag on their broken foundations. One thrifty spot shone out like a jewel in the surrounding shiftlessness, an acre of rich blue grass inclosed in a high, tight fence. In this spot dwelt Lady, a cow of noble pedigree and vast fame. For Lady, Nathan Hamm was willing to work. He cut unpalatable weeds from the pasture and kept her shed weatherproof and filled with clean bedding. To him Lady was a fetish; she represented his ideals of beauty, respectability, and worldly advancement. Across the river roamed the large and well bred herd of Beddle. In the collection of thoroughbreds there was none so fine as Lady. The legislator's offers for her were large and persistent, and they were refused with emphatic scorn by Lady's adoring owner.

**A HOUND** in the Hamm yard howled. Then he ran barking to the gate. There was silence. The dog slouched toward the rear buildings. From Lady's shed there came a soft rustling. The door was open.

A man and a woman stood beside Lady. The woman held a small lantern which gave a dim light. The man was fastening a strap about the cow's neck. The dog drew back snarling. The woman spoke to him, and he came slowly toward her. The man took the lantern from the woman's hand, extinguished it, and laid it carefully in the manger. He led the cow from the shed, and the woman closed the door.

Through the pasture they led Lady, and across the bridge that connected the Hamm and Beddle farms. On the bridge the man left the rope that had tied Lady in her shed. The dog followed them to the bridge, howled for a moment, and slunk back to the house.

**WE'VE** got the story—caught Beddle—facts, proofs, everything!" The city editor swung into the office of the managing editor, slammed the door behind him, and waved a handful of papers. "Look at it, Northrup! Look at it! Confession of a man he bought. Affidavits—the whole blessed, beautiful, scandalous story substantiated by facts!"

The chief caught the papers from his hand and read rapidly through them. "Well, I'll be blanked!" He laid the papers on his desk and reread them. "Who brought in this story?"

"That freak office boy we had last week."

The chief brought both fists down clenched upon the papers. "An office boy!" he shouted. "An office boy! And you, a newspaper man, bring me as facts the drivel of a red-headed street urchin! Do you want me to make the little hobo city editor?"

"He is in the outer room. I'll send him in and you can offer him the job."

"You're not the office boy!" exclaimed the chief. Instinctively he glanced at the man's hands. He knew them.

The young man, slender and boyish, keen eyed and firm lipped, looked straight into the eyes of the editor. "I am, Mr. Northrup. I am also the man you threw out of your office a month ago because he had the temerity to ask for a position on the biggest paper in the city."

"What was the place you wanted,—associate editor, dramatic critic, beauty specialist?"

"I asked for a chance to make good on the local page. You told me that I looked like a man who could do just one thing with a newspaper,—peddle it in the street. I intended to show you whether or not I could do anything. I took your office boy's place because I wanted to learn the inner workings of your office. I found out that the story you most wanted and could not get was one on Beddle. What do you think of the one I've brought you?"

"Where did you get it?"

"In Exton."

The editor pointed to a chair beside his desk. "Will you sit down," he said, "and tell me how you got it?"

The boy sat down. "I was born and raised in Exton—"

The editor looked up quickly. His eyes turned to the picture on the wall. The boy's eyes followed the editor's to the picture.

"I was born and raised in Exton," he repeated. "I know their county politics, and I know the personal weaknesses of the people. Last year Beddle had a lot of opposition for renomination. He was nominated in a delegate convention by one vote, that of Nathan Hamm. I believed Hamm had sold his vote to Beddle; but I could not prove it until Hamm got mad at Beddle and told. He is so angry that he is trying to ruin Beddle by exposing some of his political tricks." A grin relaxed the set muscles about the young man's mouth. "He thinks Beddle stole his cow, and he wants to get even."

"It isn't possible that Beddle stole a cow—"

"Hamm woke up one morning to find his one, grand, idolized cow gone, a lantern that he thinks is Beddle's in the manger, the cow's rope on the bridge between the two farms. The disappearance occurred last Saturday night when Beddle was home from the capital for his usual Sunday visit. Hamm accused Beddle, who has always coveted the cow, and demanded his property. Beddle denied the theft. The cow is still undiscovered, and Hamm is wreaking his wrath on Beddle."

"There is Hamm's affidavit that Beddle gave him five hundred dollars for his vote in the convention; also affidavits from merchants in Exton that Hamm, the day after Beddle's nomination, paid a number of old bills—the first time in his lazy life that he ever did such a thing."

"Beddle's reputation for sanctity and clean politics will receive a terrific whack when the public learns the methods he used to secure his last nomination. If you run this story tomorrow, Beddle and the measure he advocates will be hooted out of the Legislature."

"I'll run it. The cow—"

"She is comfortable and happy. Tonight she will return to the Hamm shed. She is—in my father's barn, a half-mile from the Hamm and Beddle places."

For a long moment the editor stared at the young



For Lady, Nathan Hamm Was Willing to Work.